Are Older Motorcyclists a Problem?

Compiled from staff reports.

Take a look at the statistics, and then decide for yourself.

Nationally, more than 3,900 motorcyclists died in 2004, up 7.3 percent from the year before, according to numbers released by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. That's the seventh straight year of increases in motorcycle deaths on U.S. roadways—an 85 percent overall rise since 1997. Most (60 percent) of the increases involved riders over the age of 40, said the NHTSA.

While not as dramatic as these national figures, Navy numbers also are climbing upward. In FY05, motorcycle fatalities totaled 21, compared to 25 in FY04, both of which far exceed the FY01-03 average of 16.3. The average age of Sailors killed in motorcycle crashes simultaneously rose from 25 in FY90 to 29 in FY03. And, although motorcycle deaths made up just 24 percent of all Navy motor-vehicle fatalities during one recent five-year period, they comprised 34 percent in FY04 and 39.6 percent in FY05.

Why have motorcycle deaths been going up disproportionately among older riders? Part of the reason is the changing demographics of bike buyers and riders. Surveys show motorcycle owners increasingly are older, affluent professionals. *[Some attribute this change to baby boomers wanting to go back to motorcycling after a long time away from it. With the mortgage close to being paid off and the kids grown, what better way to treat a mid-life crisis than by spending some of that extra cash on a final youthful fling?—Ed.]* According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, the typical U.S. bike owner today is about 38 years old, married, earning $44,250 at a professional, managerial or technical job. In 1980, the typical owner was a 24-year-old, earning $17,500.

The mistake many people make is assuming that older motorcyclists are safer than younger riders. The growing number of cyclists 40 and over who get killed in crashes shows that mature riders aren't immune from the obvious hazards of cycling.

According to Joe Perfetto, a motorcycle-safety specialist at the Naval Safety Center, "These older 'new' riders sometimes don't wear protective gear, or they wear the wrong kind. *[Mandatory protective gear, according to OpNavInst 5100.12G, includes a DoT-approved helmet, long trousers, long-sleeved shirt, full-fingered leather gloves, hard-soled shoes with heels that protect the ankle, protective eyewear, and a reflective vest.—Ed.]* As a result, just like with the young riders, when older riders lose control and crash into something, or when a motorist rams into them, the resulting injuries invariably are much worse, if not fatal." Data from FY99 through June 2004 shows that 29 percent of the Navy motorcyclists killed in wrecks lost control of their bikes. Twenty-eight percent were speeding, and 21 percent had been drinking.

After 27 years of riding motorcycles, Perfetto's own record is excellent. "I've fallen once—before I took the motorcycle-safety class," he recalled. "When I fell, I didn't know what I had done wrong. Now I do," he added.

Perfetto has avoided mishaps since then, but not without having his share of close calls. "I rode motorcycles in Naples for five years," he said with a smile. "I had a close call every single day." He attributes his success to recognizing and managing the risks of riding and to never being in a hurry.

A major part of Perfetto's job at the Safety Center is training motorcycle-safety instructors (now called RiderCoaches). The Navy is scrambling to provide instructors to meet the growing demand. "There are more riders wanting to take the class than there are instructors available," Perfetto pointed out. And, although taking the class is extremely important, he said that "continuing education is the key," not just a one-time class. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation continually creates new sorts of classes to help keep everyone's skills fresh and up to date.

Motorcyclists need to take advantage of everything they can to avoid becoming another negative statistic—like the Sailor who was going 115 mph when he went to pass an SUV. He misjudged his speed and the distance to the SUV and subsequently hit the vehicle, killing himself. Nationwide, the risk per mile of dying in a motorcycle crash is 21 times higher than that of dying in a car wreck. Even if the motorcyclist isn't killed during an accident, he and/or any passenger usually will be injured seriously.

With all the inherent dangers, why do so many people *[reportedly 8.8 million nationwide in 2003, up*

from 6.57 million just six years earlier] ride motorcycles? There are many valid reasons:

• Motorcycles are fun. The feeling of oneness with the machine can be compared to flying in an open environment—freedom.

• Motorcycles need less gas and oil and generally cost less to maintain.

• They're easier to find parking spaces for and take up less space in a garage.

• Motorcycles usually have a lower purchase price.

• Certain models convey an automatic image of "coolness" or "badness," which appeals to some types of riders.

• Motorcycling often is an enthusiast's sport, and the challenge comes from the unique mental and coordinated physical skills necessary to operate the machine.

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• There are many types to choose from to suit the individual needs and desires.

• Motorcycle touring, with a group or solo, may be a recreational or social activity.

• Motorcycling makes commuting fun, and coming to work may become the highlight of the day.

The most important differences between four-wheeled vehicles and motorcycles are stability, visibility and vulnerability. Given these inequities, why is the automobile driver responsible for the safety of a motorcyclist who willingly chooses to accept the high element of risk? Because statistics generally concur that about 75 percent of all motorcycle accidents involve another vehicle (usually a passenger automobile).

Of these accidents, a passenger vehicle violating a motorcycle's right-of-way causes 66 percent. Translated, this means approximately half of all motorcycle accidents are the fault of a four-wheeled vehicle's driver. Three major factors seem to predominate in these accidents:

• It's difficult to "see" a motorcycle in traffic or when it's hidden in a vehicle's blind spot. The frontal profile of a motorcycle is fairly narrow, which contributes to the difficulty of seeing it.

• A motorcycle's speed is difficult to judge as it approaches a passenger vehicle. Many auto drivers claim a motorcycle looks way back when they check, only to suddenly find it next to them when they change lanes.

• Car drivers tend to be inattentive with regard to motorcyclists and only expect collisions with other cars or trucks. In this age of cellular phones and passenger-car gadgetry, it's smart to expect auto drivers to be more distracted, with a subsequent loss of focus on road conditions ahead.

Being aware of the basic factors that cause auto drivers to violate a motorcyclist's right-of-way should help these offending auto drivers to lower the high risk of motorcycling.

There are many crashes in which motorcyclists are using the road responsibly and minimizing their own risks but still are put at risk because car drivers fail to recognize potential hazards. Auto drivers, as well as motorcyclists, share in the responsibility of driving defensively, given the extreme vulnerability of motorcyclists.

Think "motorcycle," even if you don't see one or drive one.